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Gaming the Composition: An ethnographic study on composing ergodic fiction



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Introduction

This ethnographic study of undergraduate writers composing digital and prose fiction expands the author's practice-based research on digital composition, which found that digital composition has significant effects on writer cognition, approach to story, and narrative elements^{1,2,3}. The aim of the study was to investigate the composition practices of experienced prose fiction writers (undergraduate students on creative writing programmes), and how they are affected by shifting these established practices into new techniques and tools offered by digital media.

Methodology

Data was collected through a 12-week taught undergraduate module. The module met for 3 hour-long sessions per week (lecture, study group, workshop). Topics and readings included narratology (theories, cognition, unnatural), interactivity, and the evolution of narrative and play. Creative readings included Twine games, hypertexts, interactive fiction, and print ergodic texts. Students completed weekly activities based on critical discussion questions and writing exercises, and recorded them in research logs. The three assessments consisted of a 2000-word digital fiction, a 2000-word prose adaptation of the digital fiction, and a 1500-word analysis of the creative writing process.

Participants completed four (4) questionnaires on their reading & writing habits:

- Initial Survey, Week 1
- Post-Storygame Survey, Week 6
- Post-Adaptation Survey, Week 9
- Final Survey, Week 12

This paper focuses on the results from the participant questionnaires; further analysis of the remaining documentation will be forthcoming.

Results

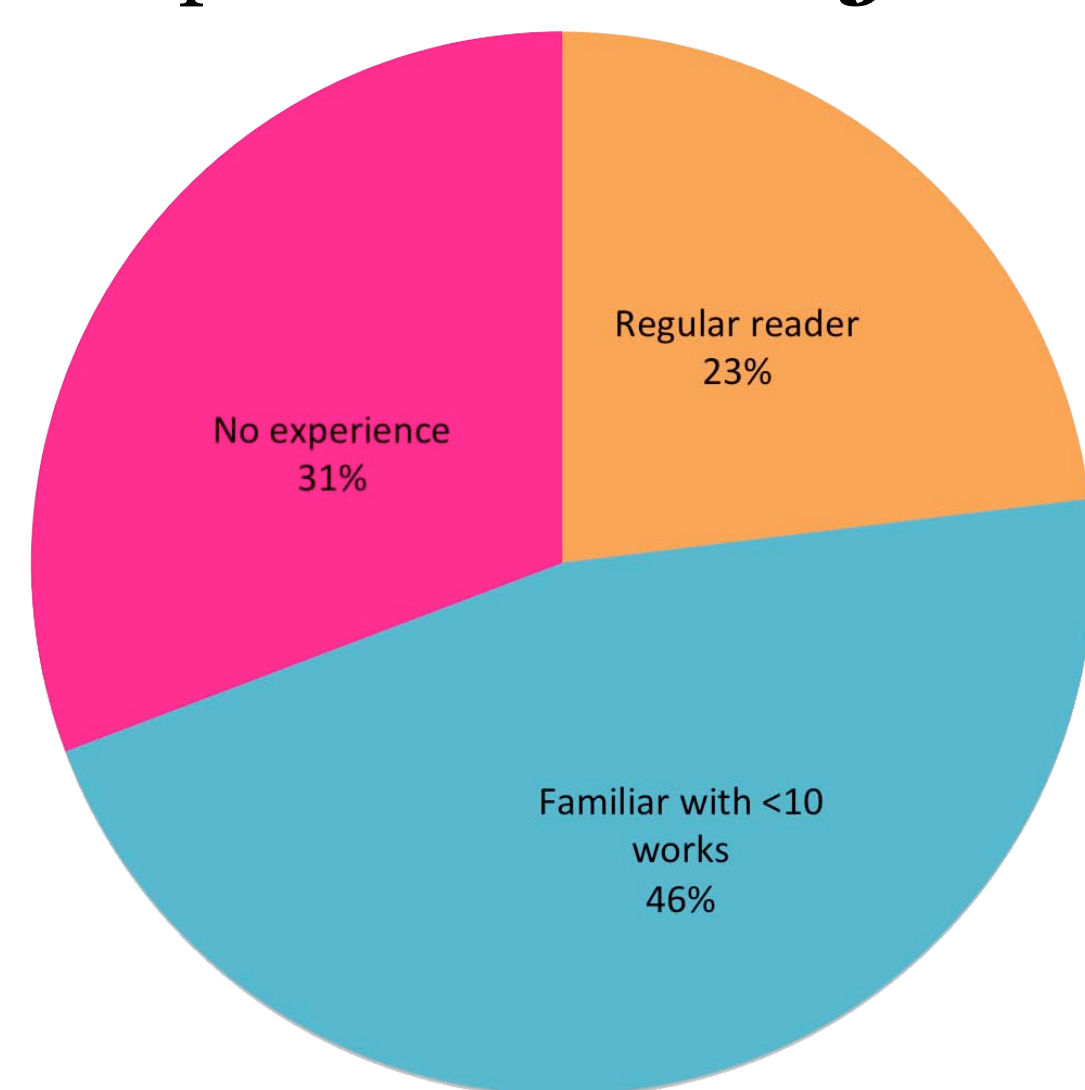
13 student-participants between the ages of 18-24 completed all assigned work, logs, and questionnaires.

Initial Survey indicates participants primarily read on their computers or mobile devices, and primarily read and write speculative fiction genres: fantasy, science fiction, fairy tale. 85% identify as gamers at intermediate or advanced level.

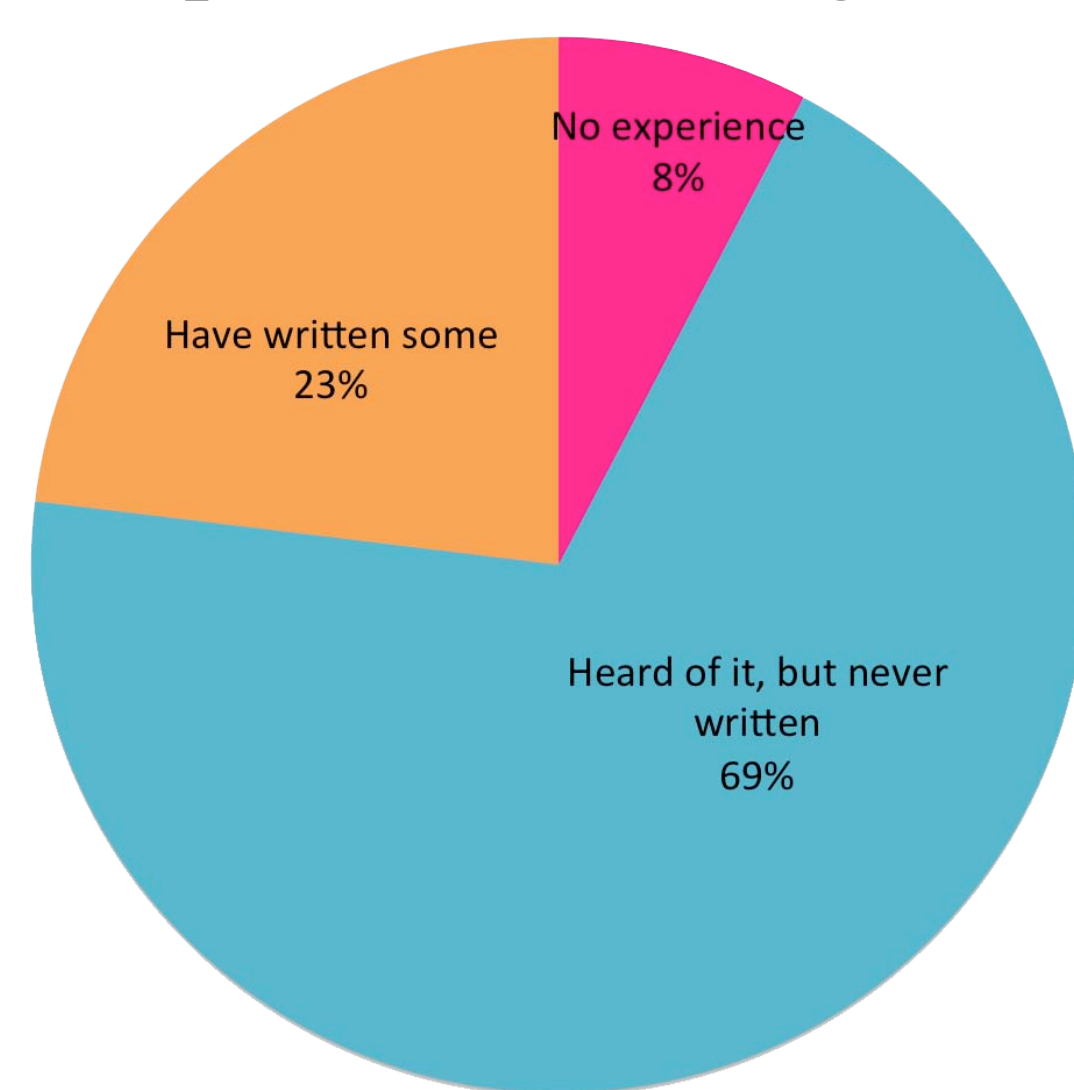
Writing Tools:

- 55% use a combination of pen/paper & word processor
- 45% use word processors alone
- For their storygames, most used Twine in combination with another tool: 47% with pen & paper, 41% with a word processor
- For their prose, their tools reverted back to pre-storygame methods, though 26.7% reported using Twine in some preparatory fashion

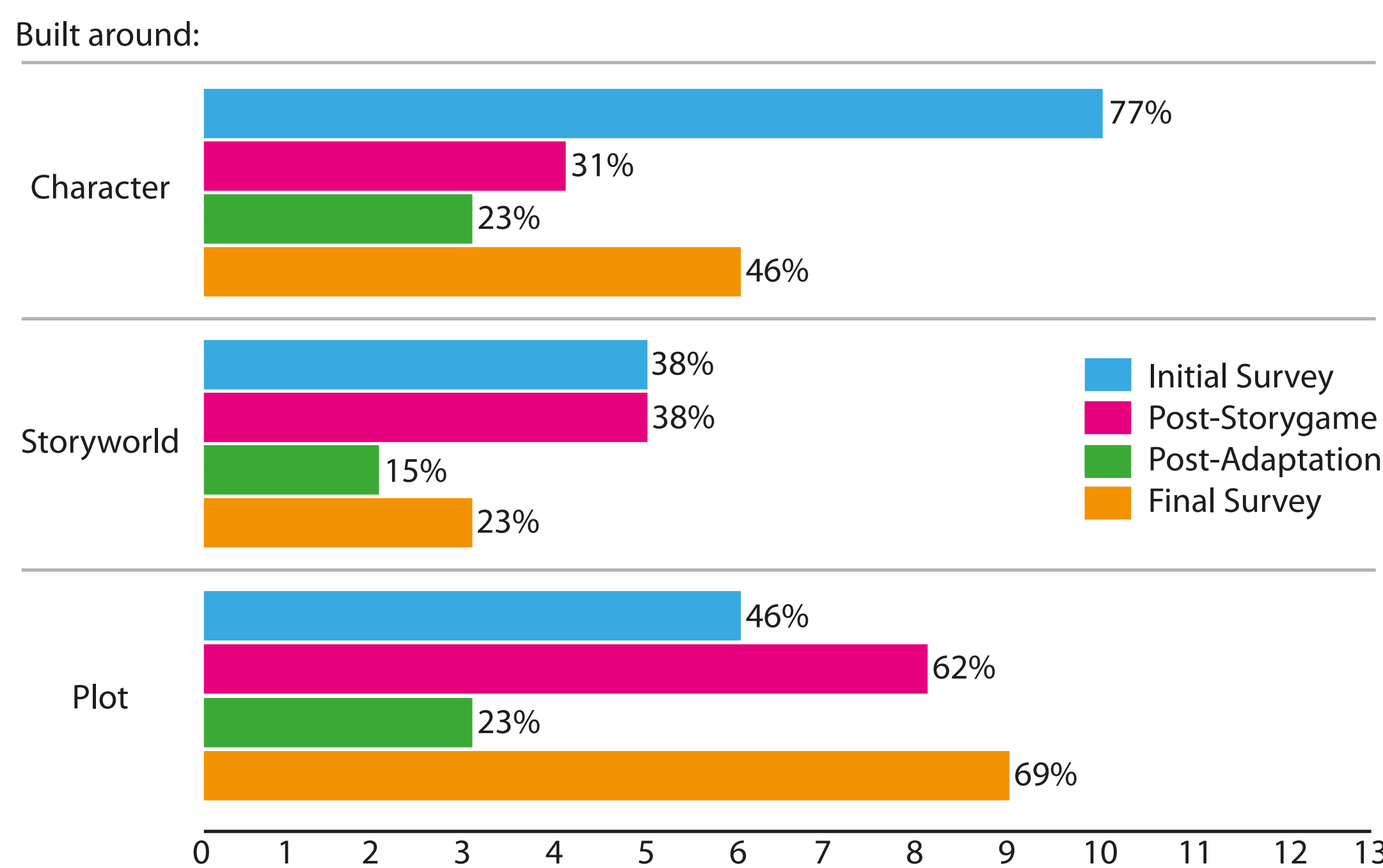
Experience *Reading* DF



Experience *Writing* DF



Participant Descriptions of Strategies for Completing Writing Projects



Writing Strategies:

Participants named *characters* (90%), *storyworld* (80%), *narrative* (80%), and *creative expression* (80%) as dominant interests in writing fiction.

Most prominent elements to transfer from storygame to prose were *unnatural narration* (26.7%) and *multiple storylines* (26.7%).

Participants were more mostly concerned with adapting *character* (60%) and *storyworld* (60%) to prose than in maintaining the *elements of play* (6.7%) from their digital fictions.

Conclusions

Writing digital fiction expands readership in digital fiction. Reading and writing digital fiction generates positive responses to the form in participant surveys, indicating the participants will continue to voluntarily engage in digital fiction outside of a classroom environment. Further, by lowering the technological barriers to entry for writing digital fiction, easy-to-use platforms such as Twine create an environment where reader-players can produce digital fiction as easily as print readers produce prose, leading to democratization of "born digital"⁴ storytelling.

Writing digital fiction shifts the writer's focus from character and narrative structure to plot and event sequences. Digital fictions incorporate many ludic elements, including multilinearity, branching structures, interactivity, non-mimetic narrative perspective^{5,6}. As many critics have noted, games and digital fictions are often lacking in "narrative quality", focusing instead on plot points and events. The results of this study indicate this may be an effect of the digital composing environment, as the writer's concerns about technological functionality and story logistics feature heavily in the rhetorical situation, and can dominate the more traditional rhetorical focus on character and emotionally effective narrative structure.

Writing digital fiction calls for more disciplined writing practices to accommodate and organize multiple storylines and interwoven pathways, as well as technological considerations.

Digital writers demonstrate an altered cognitive approach to writing, with multicursal consideration of character choices and pathways, possibilities for story, and plot alternatives. They report being more open to revision and potential changes.

This study's results support previous arguments^{1,7,8,9,10,11} that digital fiction and writers are more likely to engage in unnatural narration.

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Further information

The "Reading Digital Fiction" project can be found online at <https://readingdigitalfiction.com/>

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